

Vision: The Mark of Our Life Together

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John 13: 31-35, Acts 11: 1-18

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In one church, when a Bible is presented to a third-grade child, the child recites a passage of Scripture. On one occasion, everything was going well until the minister came to a little boy who couldn't remember his name, much less a Bible verse. The little boy's eyes frantically searched for his mother, who was seated very near the front. When he finally spotted her, he was greatly relieved when she whispered, "I am the light of the world," to which he immediately bellowed, "My mother is the light of the world!"

(from Rodney Wilmar, Minneapolis, MN, 2000.)

This coming week, while we are combing through the greeting cards for that one that "fits" the mother-figures in our lives, we might note most everyone thinks of Mother as leading straight to the word, LOVE. We know very well that such a word is an ideal, yet in today's Gospel, we hear Jesus telling us that we are to "love one another" just as he has loved us, knowing us each, in everything we think and do, and still -- loving us!

In the 1970's, Stephen and I studied in a small Christian community in the Swiss Alps. While we were there, its founder and theologian Francis Schaeffer was working on an influential book called *The Mark of the Christian*. In it, Schaeffer explored just how vital love is as the main identifying "mark" of a Christian community. A Christian church is not about its success, size, or number of programs. It is defined by how well we love one another—both in the church and outside it, how well we nurture and care for people in the world near and far.

In today's Gospel, Jesus explained to the disciples, "*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also*

should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (v. 34).

But what is so new about that? Even Old Testament scriptures called people to love and to glorify God by their love. Perhaps it was “new” because Jesus is calling his disciples and the church they would create, to open the doors wider: that God’s love calls us to a radical faith, both as individuals and as a community of faith. Remember the campfire song, “They will know we are Christians by our love, by our love. Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.”

In light of this new commandment, writer Nathan Baxter asks what we Christians do when one of the greatest problems facing America today is political anger? He asks, “What can we, as a Christian church, contribute to a society which is bitterly divided on so many issues? Some scholars and community leaders worry that we are so deeply divided that violence may become a more common response to conflict than nonviolent protest, civil disobedience or traditional forms of negotiation.” However, Baxter points out that this also can be a time of great opportunity for the Christian church to witness, but perhaps not in the ways in which we might think. Our greatest witness may not be in taking one position or another. Like the world around us, the Christian church is divided on many of the same issues -- abortion, euthanasia, sexual orientation, immigration and constitutional issues such as school prayer, to name a few. There are probably no easy or immediate answers to these questions for the Church or society” (Rt. Rev. Nathan Baxter, “What a Christian Community Can Offer a Polarized Society,” March 03, 1996, www.Day 1).

But in the midst of such difficult times there is a contribution that we can make. As the Apostle Paul says in letter to the Corinthians, we can show "a more excellent way" to live. We can demonstrate how to deal with differences while maintaining a sense of community, by our love. I Corinthians 13 holds up love as something that, "*is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful...*" (vs 4-5). The passage concludes like this: "*And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*" Yes, the more excellent way is love -- not necessarily a warm fuzzy feeling, but a Godly respect; a respect born of an understanding that others in the community are persons who are loved and received by God even though we may strongly disagree with them.

Our model of how to love is, of course, Jesus. His acts of love and care were so often met with criticism, questioning, even arrest! Jesus was called to account for eating and drinking with sinners, for healing on the Sabbath, for modeling forgiveness for a woman caught in adultery, to name just a few things. To those who had set ways of observing their faith, his love looked like resistance. They were unable to open their eyes to the newness God was bringing, right before their eyes.

It is not by accident that today's lectionary reading from Acts also deals with resistance. The apostles who led the early church were questioning Peter's decision to proclaim the Christian Gospel to a new group. In Chapter 11, Peter is responding to the disciples' question: Why had he allowed Gentiles into Christian belief? The disciples were wary of these strangers who thought and dressed and even ate differently from them.

Remember that the first Christians, like Jesus, were Jews. At this early point in Church history, Christianity was seen as a Jewish sect or cult.

Let's step back a moment to review the scene. As the Apostle Paul and others began preaching in Gentile communities, more and more Gentiles were believing in the Gospel. But they did not see the need to adhere to Jewish custom and law. And none of the issues facing the church then was more sensitive or divisive than the issue of whether Gentile Christians had to be circumcised and follow the Jewish law. Concerned leaders from the older Christian communities came to these Gentile converts and taught that they could not be Christians if they did not observe the Jewish law and be circumcised.

Now to today's Christian church, this may seem like a trivial matter. But it was a bitterly divisive issue then, and it gave rise to strong political feelings about who was a conservative and who was a liberal, or who was orthodox and who was a heretic. This was a strong controversy with the conservative side led by Peter and James and the other side led by Paul and Barnabas.

Now, Peter was a fine Jewish Christian like the rest of the disciples, and he had resisted sharing anything with Gentiles, especially because they ate food considered unclean. So now Peter had to explain to the disciples his recent change of heart. In a strange series of visions with those sheets filled with animals, Peter had talked with God about what was deemed "clean" and "unclean" food. But he was aware that this was not a food discussion; this was about people—those who did not follow Jewish purity laws, and therefore people whom Jews had never even considered as being loved by God.

God gave Peter the vision three times, all in order to overcome Peter's personal resistance to opening wide the doors of God's mercy and good news. At the same time, the Gentile Cornelius was being told by an angel to send messengers to get Peter to come tell him how to be saved. Peter was being asked to open the door to a group that had never even been on his evangelism list. Peter finally got up and went, and baptized Cornelius and his family in the Christian faith.

That event was a turning point in the larger story of the spread of Christianity. Peter's action was vital to the survival and to the future impact that the Church would make in the world. Peter's trip to Cornelius' house and his willingness to do a radical new thing, previously not even considered, says something to us today.

As we review the new vision we have about helping people "become disciples" we need to reflect upon how this story speaks to us. We might ask, "How far should we stretch in our efforts to build bridges between our church and the culture that dominates us, even in national and local issues?" We might also ask why it is so hard to get new unchurched folks through the door? Perhaps more, how can we do a better job of going out to them with faith?" How willing are we to be open to changing our preconceptions in order to take the Good News, especially to reach people we tend to dismiss? Those with piercings and different dress, and other subcultures? How do we invite in those who are too ashamed to even cross the threshold of a church door?

Finally, perhaps we at Fairfield Church need to ask, "What happens to our own vision of 'outsiders' once we're considered the church's 'insiders'?" Lots of questions. In all, how do we live out the implications of

biblical stories like this of Peter in welcoming and baptizing those seen as “different” from us, and in loving them?

We--you and I can demonstrate love, the mark of the Christian life, through our sharing the peace and the Lord’s Supper, through our sharing our gifts with the world so in need, and being hospitable to all people. It is my prayer that we each keep Jesus’ commandment to love as our first order. This poem is a good expression of such love:

He drew a circle that shut me out—

Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.

But Love and I had the wit to win:

We drew a circle that took him in. Edwin Markham (*Ibid.*, 228)

So may the doors of our church, the doors of our homes, and the doors of our hearts open wider as we grow in displaying the mark of followers of Christ. Alleluia. Amen.